

THE COMPETENCE CHECK IDENTIFIES AND DOCUMENTS THE COMPETENCIES OF REFUGEES REGISTERED AS UNEMPLOYED TO INFORM THE AUSTRIAN PES (AMS) ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL'S EMPLOYABILITY AND/OR NEEDS FOR FURTHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT MEASURES¹.

'Competence check' for the vocational integration of refugees (Kompetenzcheck)

Publication date: September 2017 (Updated January 2019)

AUSTRIA

The Competence Check is a tool used to assess the skills, qualifications and language knowledge of refugees. It is used to help the PES decide on further intervention measures as part of the Competence Check. The Competence Check is offered in the mother tongue of the refugees involved (e.g. Farsi/Dari, Arabic, Russian, and French) and in German for those with sufficient German language skills; it takes 5-7 weeks to complete. The aim of the Competence Check is to recognise existing skills and qualifications and to define additional need for qualifications. It also provides refugees with information about employment and the Austrian education system. The Viennese PES (Arbeitsmarktservice Wien (AMS)) piloted the Competence Check in the autumn of 2015² and tested it with a first cohort of 898 refugees³. Since the beginning of 2016, the qualifications of refugees have been collected in all Länder through Competence Checks⁴. From September 2017, a compulsory introduction year will be introduced for all refugees and the Competence Check will be an integral part of it⁵.

Name of the PES

Austrian PES (Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich (AMS)) PES Vienna (AMS Wien) performed the pilot project..

Scope of measure

National

When was the practice implemented?

Piloted in two phases from August 2015 to May 2016 in Vienna. Rolled out in Vienna and to AMS branches in all other regions of Austria in 2016. Ongoing.

- 1 European Union (2017), *Peer Review on Competence Check for the Labour Market Integration of Female Refugees*, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.
- 2 Internet: <http://www.ams.at/ueber-ams/medien/ams-oesterreich-news/arbeitsmarktintegration-gefluechteter-menschen-bilanz-ausblick>
- 2 Internet: <https://kurier.at/wirtschaft/ziel-6000-fluechtlinge-bis-juni-2017-beim-ams-kompetenzcheck/197.186.755>
- 4 Internet: <http://www.ams.at/ueber-ams/medien/ams-oesterreich-news/arbeitsmarktintegration-gefluechteter-menschen-bilanz-ausblick>
- 5 *Labour Market integration of refugees in Austria: Peer Review on 'Competence Check for the Labour Market Integration of Female Refugees'* presented by Katharina Luger, Labour Market Division, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, at the Thematic Review Workshop on 'PES Initiatives around Skills, Competencies and Qualifications of Refugees and Asylum Seekers' held in Nuremberg, Germany, on 27 – 28 April 2017.

<p>What was the driver for introducing the practice? Was it internal or external?</p>	<p>As a result of the rapid growth in the numbers of refugees to Austria in 2015/16, information deficits emerged for labour market authorities who did not know how to assess this new target group. Similarly, refugees did not know how to locate themselves and their competencies in their new host country⁶. This resulted in a new labour market measure, the Competence Check for refugees, being introduced. At the same time Austria faced the highest unemployment rate since the financial crisis of 2008/09. In the first half of 2015 the overall unemployment rate was 9 %, and 14 % for migrant workers with two thirds of all registered unemployed refugees based in Vienna⁷. A quick response was required to recognise the prior learning and work experiences of refugees registered with the AMS, in order to avoid de-qualification and demotivation of refugees. To reach the goal of getting refugees into jobs quickly, it was important to check their skills and qualifications as soon as possible in order to recognise their skills and prepare a labour market development plan based on these results. Moreover, AMS case workers who usually deal with native clients do not necessarily have the capacity, or the competencies to identify, interpret, assess and document competencies and (often undocumented) qualifications of refugees⁸. Therefore, the AMS needed to develop an instrument to gain better information about individual clients from this new target group and did so via the Competence Check⁹. Since August 2015, in order to obtain better and more information about the educational level and work experience of refugees registered as unemployed and living in Vienna, the Viennese PES started to survey their qualification and skills, their knowledge of foreign languages and the German language, among other aspects.</p>
<p>Which organisation was involved in its implementation?</p>	<p>Training institutions (provider institutions) provide the Competence Checks on behalf of the PES Vienna. AMS branches in all other regions of Austria do not necessarily follow the concept developed in Vienna and have the freedom to develop their own instruments¹⁰.</p>
<p>Which groups were targeted by the practice?</p>	<p>Refugees registered as unemployed.</p>
<p>What were the practice's main objectives?</p>	<p>The aim of this project was to check the skills and competences of participants to find out about and define their needs and training requirements, in order to support their integration into the labour market (via field trials), and to provide them with general information about job seeking, the Austrian education system, and the rights and duties of employees and employers in Austria.</p>

⁷ European Union (2017), op. cit. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/ip053_en.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

What activities were carried out?	<p>The typical referral process in the context of the Competence Check in Vienna follows the sequence listed here¹¹:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ After having received a <i>positive decision</i> on asylum or subsidiary protection, refugees must contact a regional integration centre of the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF). ▶ In counselling interviews the ÖIF identifies the needs for integration measures. In most cases, the ÖIF refers individuals to basic <i>German language courses (A1, beginner)</i> which are offered by providers accredited by the ÖIF. ▶ Basic language competencies are a prerequisite for the <i>first consultation and registration with AMS</i>. AMS usually refers clients to two parallel measures: a second basic language course (A2, elementary) and the Competence Check by one of the contracted providers. ▶ During the <i>Competence Check</i>, skills and qualifications are assessed. The measure takes 5-7 weeks for each participant to complete. Each participant has one hour of one-on-one biographical interviewing/ conversations each week and ten hours of workshops each week. While in the one-on-one settings qualifications are surveyed, in the workshops the participants are getting useful information on the Austrian labour market, the application procedure and the Austrian education system, social insurance system, housing and health. If needed, the persons involved are sent to various institutions to check their practical skills, and work experience is checked and verified by field trials (for example: if somebody says he/she has been a painter for 3 years in their home country, then the person is sent to a professional painter who checks their skills in relation to the required competences of a completed vocational training in Austria). ▶ A <i>Results Report</i> (past experiences, current competencies) and a development plan (for the next 1.5 years) regarding integration into the labour market are elaborated. A <i>second basic German language course (A2, elementary)</i> is completed in parallel. ▶ The provider of the respective Competence Check often refers participants to other institutions, which are responsible for the formal <i>recognition of qualifications, expert opinions and/or tests on competencies</i>. ▶ When <i>returning to the AMS</i> with these documents, the AMS case worker can integrate the client into the regular consultancy process and decide on immediate placement opportunities or on further placement or training measures (e.g. step2Austria or step2business). <p>However, there can be cases that deviate from this sequence, e.g. when clients have already better language skills, when their competencies enable them to have a clear path towards recognition, or when they can be placed right away.</p>
What resources and other relevant organisational aspects were involved?	While it is nationally implemented by the AMS, regional PES branches are free to adopt or develop their own instruments. With respect to refugees registered as unemployed in Vienna, the whole measure is contracted out to training institutions on behalf of the PES Vienna.
What were the source(s) of funding?	National budget for active labour market policy.
What were the outputs of the practice: people reached and products?	In 2016, a total of 5 982 people granted asylum or subsidiary protection (75 % men, 25 % women) completed a Competence Check.

11 Largely excerpted from European Union (2017), op cit. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/ip053_en.pdf

What outcomes have been identified?

- ▶ Results for 2016 reveal that, according to countries of origin, Competence Check participants from Syria, Iran and Iraq have the highest qualifications. For example, 62 % of participants from Syria (total: 2 728 people), 85 % of participants from Iran (375 persons in total) and 57 % of participants from Iraq (331 persons in total) have either achieved undergraduate education or matriculation.
- ▶ Competence Check participants from Afghanistan (1 401 people) are the least qualified: only 20 % of them have an education that goes beyond compulsory education.
- ▶ The number of competence checked females was 1 484, and while the share of academics was high, most of these women have little or no professional experience.
- ▶ The AMS (in 2017) gives a tentative description of the impact of all labour market measures for refugees: 9 523 individuals given residence status in 2015 were registered with AMS between January 2015 and June 2016. By December 2016, 15 % of this group were employed (44 % unemployed, 23 % in AMS training and 18 % out of labour force). For the period January 2015 to December 2016, 19 % from this group were employed for at least 62 days (AMS, 2017).

What are the lessons learnt and success factors?

Lessons learnt include¹²

- ▶ The Competence Check is an efficient way of gaining relevant information about refugees. High qualification levels were found among the first initial cohorts of refugees in 2015¹³.
- ▶ Differences between refugees from different countries and between male and females became apparent.
- ▶ Based on the findings of the Competence Check, AMS could diversify and adjust its portfolio of measures, e.g. by creating support for recognition of qualifications for higher qualified refugees and intense forms of basic education for clients with lower skills (AMS 2016).
- ▶ For the individual participant, it also provides information about Austrian society, and the welfare system and labour market in particular, allowing people to locate their competences in an Austrian context.

Success factors included:

- ▶ The PES Vienna is experienced in the counselling of jobseekers with migration backgrounds and setting up projects for this target group.
- ▶ The use of native speaking training staff was very useful to avoid language and cultural barriers and to get valid information from the participants.
- ▶ The coaches' knowledge of the education system of the countries of origin as well as their knowledge of the Austrian education and qualification system was very useful.

¹² The following has been largely excerpted from European Union (2017), op. cit. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/ip053_en.pdf

¹³ The observations for these groups were confirmed by the insights the Austrian Academy of Science gained in an independent, parallel study on refugees in Austria at that time (ÖAW 2016), a lucky coincidence, which contributed to the legitimacy of the competence check for gathering valid information.



Contact details for further information

Name: Petra Mag Draxl, Kai Mag Themel

Email: petra.draxl@ams.at, kai.themel@ams.at